Legionnaires disease causes no panic

By James Breiner
Dispatch City Hall Reporter

City and state officials are recommending no special health precautions for seven major local complexes which they say have Legionnaires Disease bacteria in their plumbing.

The seven buildings or complexes are:
- The State Office Tower, 30 E. Broad St.
- The Statehouse
- The entire Ohio State University complex, which has a single recirculating hot-water system.
- LeVeque Tower, 50 W. Broad St.
- Central Ohio Psychiatric Hospital, 1960 W. Broad St.
- American Hospital Supply warehouse, 2340 McGaw Rd.
- The Parsons Ave. Water Plant, 5600 Parsons Ave.

COLUMBUS Health Commissioner William C. Myers identified the seven Wednesday.

An 18-month study commissioned by the city had determined there were no Legionnaires Disease bacteria in the distribution systems at the water treatment plants.

Myers said the seven buildings or complexes were among 20 randomly sampled for the bacteria, called Legionella pneumophila.

"I think that we have to assume Legionella is present in all large hot-water recirculating systems," Myers said. "From a health perspective, we're not recommending any remedial action. The Centers for Disease Control (at Atlanta) recommends action only when you have a reported cluster of cases, and we don't have that." Dr. Thomas J. Halpin, chief of the state's Bureau of Preventive Medicine, agreed.

"I CAN SAFELY say there is no danger to the workers in the buildings," he said. Most outbreaks of the disease occur in hospitals, where people have weakened immune systems that make them vulnerable to the disease, he said.

The bacteria found at the water plant were in the plumbing system serving the plant itself, not in the treated water leaving the plant, said William E. Poteet, supply administrator.

Research has not established what might be considered a safe level of Legionella in water, but studies have shown that up to 40 percent of the population has antibodies to Legionnaires' disease, indicating they had contracted the disease at some time, said Dr. Peter Parthem, the city's medical director.

The Legionella bacteria, which occur everywhere in water environments, multiply most rapidly in water of about 110 degrees. Large buildings have looped hot-water systems in which the water is recirculated and reheated if it is not drawn off at the tap. The bacteria often are found in these systems.

HOSPITALS KEEP their hot water at about 110 degrees to prevent weakened patients from scalding themselves. Halpin said, "We really don't see Legionnaires' cases in clusters except in hospitals."

Last year, 98 cases of the disease were reported statewide with 24 deaths, but Halpin believes many cases go unreported. Franklin County, where two hospitals conduct research on the disease, accounted for a disproportionately large number of 22 reported cases.

The disease, which causes pneumonia symptoms, is contracted through inhaling the bacteria, often from the spray of a shower, rather than by drinking infected water.

Researchers from the Ohio State University departments of medicine and microbiology took samples from 95 sites. No Legionella bacteria were found in the 25 private homes sampled.

Researchers believe the Legionella enter plumbing systems through leaks or new construction.